DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 039 847 HE 001 573

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Susman, Warren I. |
| TITLE | Is Increased Participation in Decision Making Enough? |
| INSTITUTION | American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C. |
| PUB DATE | 2 Mar 70 |
| NOTE | 4p.; Paper presented at the 25th national conference of the American Association for Higher Education, Chicago, Illinois, March 2, 1970 |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.30 |
| DESCRIPTORS | Activism, Decision Making, *Governance, *Higher Education, *Institutional Role, *Social Responsibility, *Student Participation, Student Role |

ABSTRACT

Much of the student rebellion has been attributed to the impersonality of the academic institution, and through the 1960's it was believed that all problems could be solved through increased student participation on college and university committees. Though increased participation has met with some success, it is by no means the major reform in governance that is needed to make academic institutions more responsive to current needs. Student representation has not really been representative of the student body; the membership of governing bodies has been changed, but the nature and function of the university has not been defined. Perhaps, instead of ignoring the students, the university has traditionally been too protective of students. The time has come for the university to withdraw as completely as possible from all nonacademic areas of student life and welfare, and transfer responsibility to the students themselves. If the university abandons some of its welfare state role, it may be able to concentrate more on learning and teaching or possibly extending educational opportunity more widely. And in rethinking its welfare function, the university should not only think of the students, but of the greater needs of the whole community. (AF)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED039847

Group 21
Monday Morning and Afternoon, March 2

# IS INCREASED PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING ENOUGH?*

Warren I. Susman
Professor of History
Rutgers University

Behind much that has generated the spirit of reform in the governance of American institutions of higher education in the last decade has been a special image of the nature of academic life. That image is surely as old as Max Beerbohm's Zuleika Dobson. In that superb academic fantasy the entire undergraduate population, despairing of its heroine's affection, casts itself into the fatal waters of Isis. Yet life at the university goes on undisturbed; that night the dons file into the halls of their several colleges as usual; and at high table dinner proceeds, in complete unawareness of the deserted benches where armies of undergraduates had sat.

This vision of an institution where students and their interests count for little or nothing has dominated much recent effort to rethink the problem of governance; the student rebellion is often attributed to the impersonality of academic institutions, their failure to take due regard of students as people. The most obvious -- and the easiest -- answer, therefore, to all problems has been to allow and extend student participation in the decision-making process at all levels. This "rediscovery" of the student has meant student representation on more and more college and university committees, even on academic senates and boards of trustees. Thus the solution of the 1960s: all problems can be solved through increased student participation that not only acknowledges their existence on campus but also demonstrates a genuine concern for them and their views.

Few have in fact fought this solution. Since few students ever seek actual participation in the day-to-day operation and administration, administrative officials frequently court peace and even student support by urging students to share many previously unique faculty concerns and faculties themselves have come more and more to see the value of student opinions and ideas which can, after all, rarely pose any threat to their prerogatives or special status on most campuses. There is no doubt that such increased participation has had, therefore, a modest success, especially a psychological one. Yet I am convinced that this simple-minded notion of increased participation is by no means the major reform in governance we have been seeking in an effort to remake our academic institutions to fit current needs and interests.

Let me offer only the barest outline of my objections. Student participation in almost every case has meant the involvement of only the smallest fraction of the student population (generally a handful of "student leaders") in the work of the university. No way has yet been found to provide genuine mass participation or even to assure a system that entails truly representative participation. Rarely do students in fact represent, in any meaningful way, a constituency to whom they are responsible. We know we are hearing the voice of some students but we seldom know whether this voice is representative or whether we are -- in the absence of

HE001 573

*Paper presented to Discussion Group 21 on "New configurations in campus Governance" at the 25th National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, Chicago, Monday, March 2, 1970. Permission to quote restricted.

effective feedback -- ignoring the larger voice of the entire student body. (In my own institution I have proposed that all students be made eligible for service on all committees and that selection be by some form of lottery in an effort to create wider involvement and especially that of students who might not normally put themselves forward as potential candidates. I think this method might be better but surely it is no full solution to the problems outlined.)

Increased participation in no sense provides for the reshaping of existing institutions; it merely changes the nature of the membership of such bodies. It represents an extension of paternalism on the part of those in power. The addition of students to various committees and even to participation in decision-making at the highest level lets our students -- indeed only some of our students -- play house. I say this in spite of my own insistence on the value of such participation because in almost no instance of which I am aware has such action been accompanied by any shift in legal -- to say nothing of moral -- responsibility. This still rests where it always has and student voices remain, no matter what they may suppose, only advisory and easily "co-opted," to use one of the students' own favorite words.

Nor has the policy enabled us to redefine with any greater precision the nature and function of the university. By insisting, in fact, on such participation on every level and in all affairs this policy has often led to greater confusion and even to new controversies about the role of the faculty, for example, as distinguished from that of students or administrators. In times calling for greater clarification of key issues and greater precision in playing vital roles, increased participation as a cure-all has often been an obfuscating process, making it more difficult to see and solve more basic problems.

But my main objection to increased participation as a solution to problems of governance is that it rests on the Zuleika Dobson image of the academic community; it accepts the assumption that students were ignored. It may very well be the fact that one of the basic problems has been far different: not that the universities cared too little for their students but that they cared too much; not that they ignored students but that they didn't ignore them enough. It may very well be that what we need is not new ways to have students drawn into the affairs of the university by more and more participation but the start of a steady withdrawal from some currently assumed campus functions to allow student development out from under the protective (and sometimes over-protective) arm of Alma Mater.

The time has come for us to be honest with our students and ourselves. The time has come to make it possible to rethink the nature and function of the university and to make possible not only the reshaping of old institutions, in and around it, but also the creation of new ones more suitable for current needs. It is the thesis of these brief remarks that (1) something more than "sharing" in the process of decision making is needed and that (2) the university must begin to surrender its role as complete student welfare state and (3) that in rethinking the welfare function of the university we ought not only to think of our students but of the greater needs of the whole community.

I am calling for a withdrawal -- as complete as possible ultimately -- of the university from all non-academic areas of student life and welfare. I am fully aware of the problems involved in even defining such areas; I confess myself that I am not certain whether this can be done for all freshmen but I am convinced that it is becoming increasingly important for at least all upper-classmen. It is not simply that I wish the university to get out of the business of providing special

services for its students; rather I seek specific transfer of responsibilities in the areas of student life and welfare to the students themselves. Students can be acknowledged as mature and effective individuals only if they do have legal and moral responsibilities in these fundamental areas. We mean, of course, to be helpful in our current efforts, maintaining huge staffs to oversee operations in this area but I wonder whether in the course of the kind of help we offer we don't deprive students of rich opportunities, whether we don't prolong their adolescence and rob them of the creative vitality and new-found sense of manhood in their critical college years. I wonder whether we don't deprive the rest of us of the kinds of experiments and even new institutional patterns that such new arrangements might foster.

I am calling for the positive encouragement and help from the universities in ushering in a new age, one in which students are asked to grapple with basic problems by creating their own community with its own institutions reflecting their own vision and needs, created and maintained in the reality of the genuine honest-to-goodness community that surrounds them with all of its legal, social, economic, political, and moral problems. They should be encouraged to arrive at their own life styles and deal seriously with the world without the buffer of university paternalism. Gradually they should be asked to assume functions the university now provides for them. Only if we do this can be free student energy and talent to create possibly a new and important set of institutions that might have consequences far beyond academe itself. I do not propose to suggest what forms these institutions might take; elsewhere there have been student unions with a wide range of activities, student cooperative dormitory and dining arrangements, student stores. Obviously there would have to be legal changes and undoubtedly initial economic aid, but these obstacles seem not insurmountable and I doubt that cost and bother could exceed what the current system entails.

The beginning of university withdrawal from these areas and transfer of responsibility and power to students and their new institutions would hopefully raise questions about the whole range of university welfare services. Should the university provide for its students psychiatric services, health centers, even student social centers staffed by professionals whose ultimate responsibility is not to the students but to university administration? Why should universities provide employment services (genteelly known as "placement offices" on most campuses?) In what sense are these legitimate university functions? If students desire or need such services could they not provide them for themselves? Let them hire their own advisors, lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists -- and let them fire them as well. Student fees already play a vital role on most campuses but in most instances they are collected by the university and administered by officials of the university (sometimes with student "participation" in decision making and sometimes not). Could not a Student Union levy such fees on its membership and administer and use such funds to meet the genuine student needs and demands that arise?

The modern American university is rapidly over extending itself and its resources. In assuming its vast welfare state role it is perhaps being forced too often to dissipate its resources, to fail to concentrate on learning and teaching or possibly to extend educational opportunities more widely. Do we not need a recasting or rethinking of priorities on campus as well as within the nation itself? Are we not approaching the time when we are going to have to ask seriously where the universities shall spend their money and effort -- on the creation of vast welfare systems for students (some of which may in fact hinder student growth) -- or on education and research?

Students have perhaps been asking some of these questions all the while. Any study of campus unrest reveals that many outbreaks (by no means all) have centered on living conditions, rules and regulations governing student life, on-campus recruiting and the like: non-academic areas. I am not, however, proposing a radical transformation of the campus as welfare state as a way of eliminating campus difficulties. There would clearly be enormous problems, grave and difficult ones, unleashed by the very effort to do what is here proposed. I seek therefore not the elimination of difficulties but a radical recasting of the relationship of the student to the university because I believe it is essential in making students genuinely creative, in contributing effectively to their growth, and in bringing back into sharper focus the key issue: what indeed IS a university and what ought its specific roles and functions to be?

In this line I am concerned further about the existence and expansion of welfare statism on university campuses because of a still larger issue. Student radicals persist in telling us something we already know: that American universities (all universities, in fact) are by their nature "elitist." That proposition -- vague as it may be -- does not particularly shock me. But I confess I wonder why so many of the facilities offered to students -- for example, health and psychiatric services, placement services, testing and guidance services -- are not handled (perhaps out of a university base or possibly as part of a larger state or community system) as part of a system of wider services provided for all in the state or community. Should we not have state-wide clinics concerned with the health and welfare of our young, clinics designed to handle emotional as well as physical problems, places that could provide expert guidance and testing to help assure that more and more young men and women were achieving satisfactory education for their talents and abilities, places that could act as manpower agencies in an effort to place all our young people and not simply college graduates in proper employment?

There are, of course, a wide variety of such agencies operating on a variety of levels even now (including those in many high schools) but would it not make more sense to pool such efforts, to create agencies serving all our young in a variety of ways so that knowledge and information could be pooled, so that genuine talent and expertise could be used for all our young men and women and not confined to the adjuncts of special institutions?

I am fully aware that these comments seem paradoxical; I start by proposing the end of welfare statism on the campus and end by suggesting another kind of extension of the same phenomenon -- perhaps out of the university itself into the larger community. I do so deliberately to force as complete as possible a reexamination of the whole problem. Convinced that increased participation in decision making is not enough, I propose that we begin to look in new directions, freeing the students to develop new ways in their own self-governance and forcing universities at the same time to reexamine their welfare-state functions as well. For the problem of governance cannot be solved until we begin to deal with it seriously in the context of what we mean a university to be and we cannot do that satisfactorily unless we take a serious new look at the campus as welfare state.